

# Cooking for Democracy

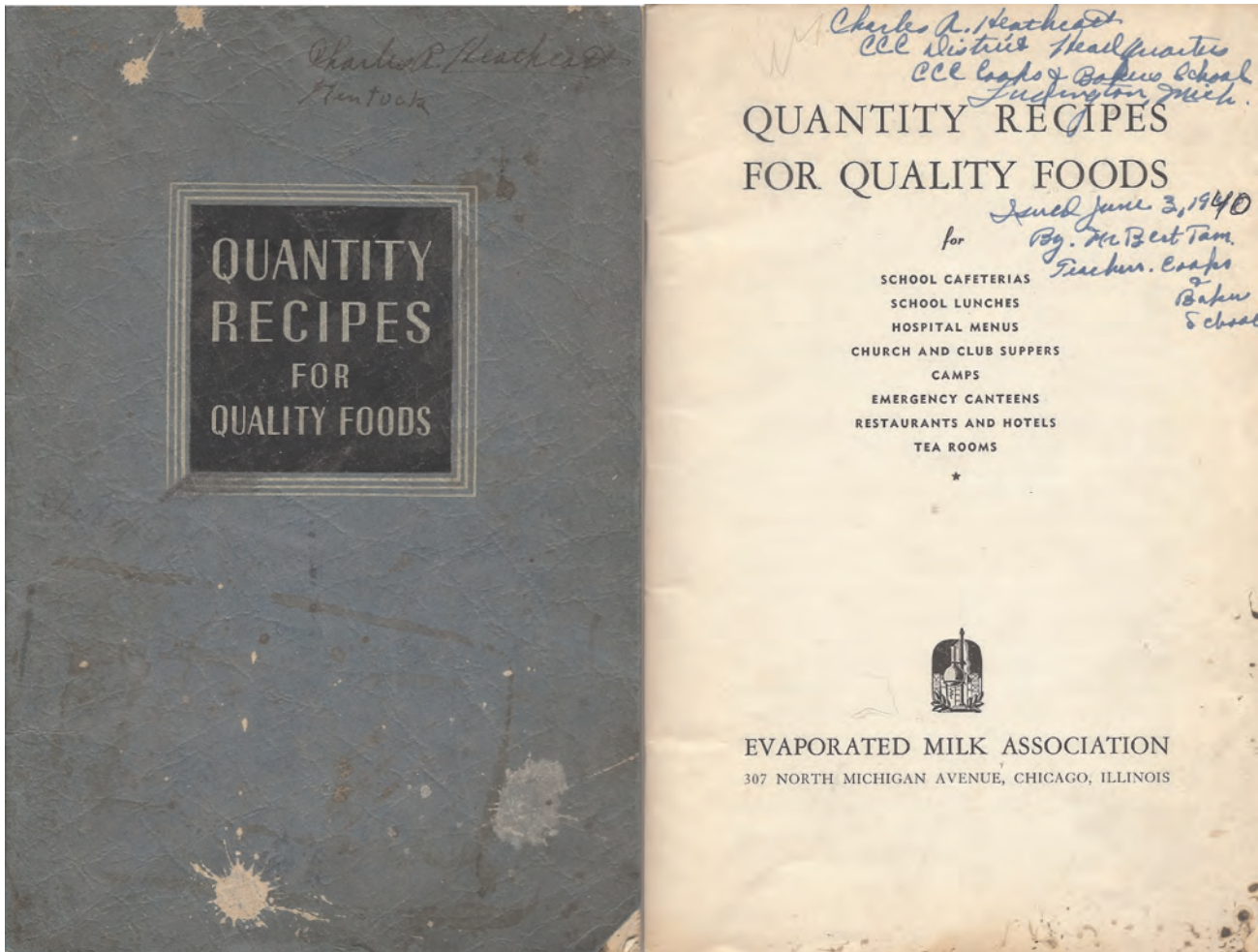


FIGURE 1: *Front cover and title page of Quantity Recipes for Quality Foods.*

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I DO NOT HAVE MANY cherished possessions, but one of them is certainly my grandfather's Civilian Conservation Corps cookbook, published by the Evaporated Milk Association. Charles Heathcott joined the CCC in 1939. He lied to get

in—he was only sixteen, while seventeen was the minimum age (U.S. Department of Labor 1938). Desperately poor and from a broken home, enlisting was the best thing he ever did for himself, and it changed his life forever.



FIGURE 2: CCC recruiting poster by Albert M. Bender, Illinois WPA Art Project (1935).  
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The Heathcotts were Tennessee sharecroppers who came up to Evansville, Indiana, to find wages in the industrial city. Grandpa's father worked as a laborer for the streetcar company, and his mother slung hash and waited tables. Like many southern migrants, they supplemented their meager incomes by selling bathtub gin and running numbers. When Charles was six years old, his parents split up, and he was sent to the St. Vincent orphanage where he grew up. At age fifteen the orphanage placed him with a foster

family, but he ran away because they were abusive. He tore off across a field, hopped the nearest freight train, and never looked back.

With a bindle slung over his shoulder, Charles hoboed across the country as a migrant laborer while looking for his older brother Vernon. It was a time of want and sadness, dereliction and dust. Shantytowns sprung up everywhere along rail yards and creeks and bottomlands. Gaunt figures roamed the countryside, calling out, "Brother, can you spare a dime?"

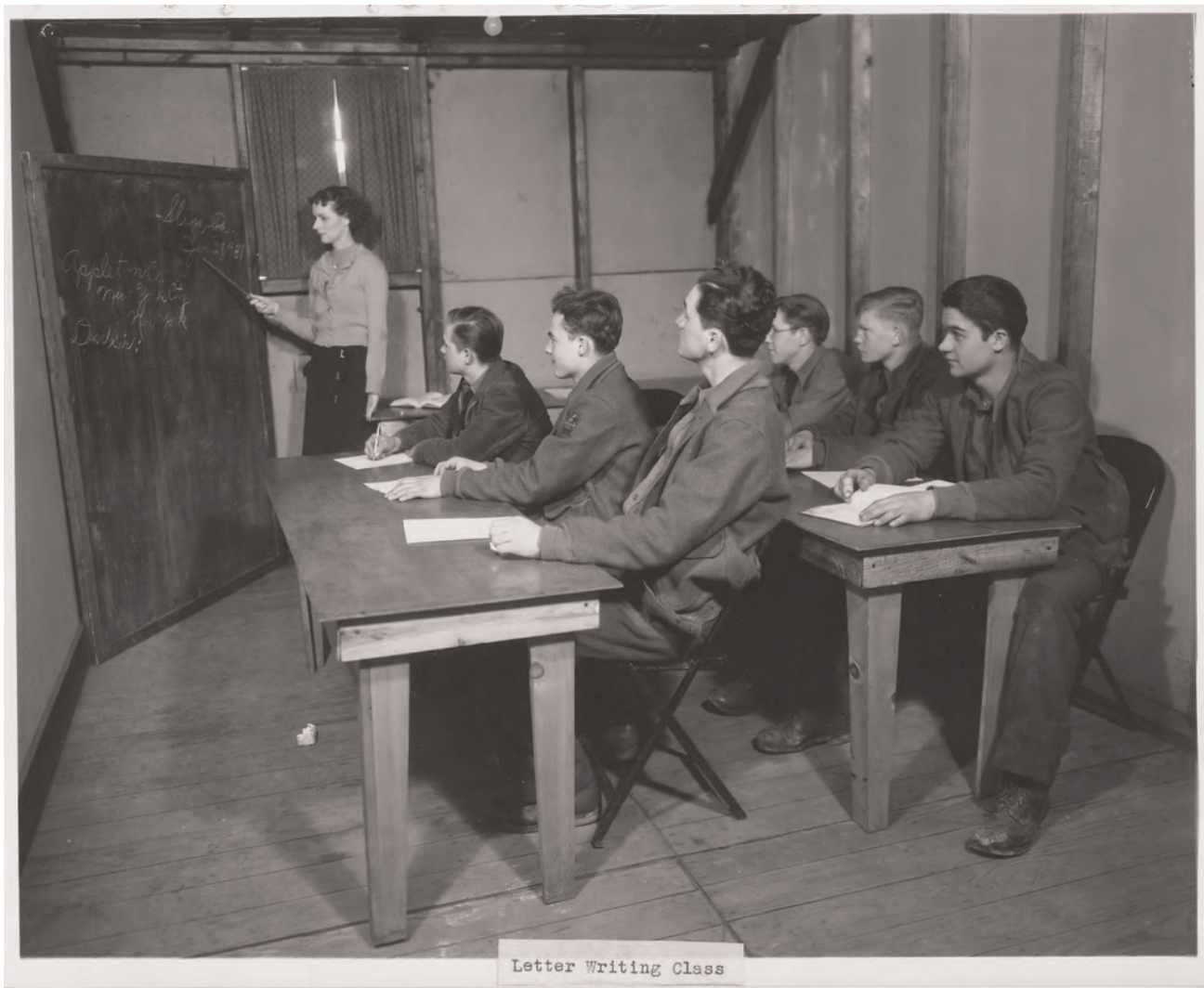


FIGURE 3: A CCC letter writing class, ca. 1933.

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Charles drifted from town to town doing odd jobs, anything from sweeping floors to loading barges and picking vegetables. He squatted in “tramp camps,” where he learned to cook “hobo stew”—a potful of anything and everything camp members could bring back from their day’s scratchings. Eventually he found his brother working with the CCC at a camp in Arizona. Vernon immediately sent Charles packing back to the Midwest, with instructions for him to join the CCC there. (Vernon would go on to a distinguished career in the U.S. Navy.)

The Roosevelt administration created the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933 as part of the national emergency response to the Great Depression. Like the Works Progress Administration, the CCC recruited, trained, and paid people to perform socially useful labor, often focused on repairing

America’s neglected infrastructure or building new public amenities (Lacey 1976; Leighninger 2007). During operations, the CCC ran camps with military efficiency, with the Department of War acting as one of the governing agencies and U.S. Army Reserve officers overseeing logistics. Camps provided a ragtag mass of unemployed youth with structure, security, medical care, room and board. Most camps also offered recreational opportunities, such as baseball teams, film nights, music, and theater clubs (Comebise 2004). Nearly six feet tall with a long reach, Charles Heathcott entered the boxing ring and won a string of tournaments for his camp.

Through its ten-year existence, the CCC employed three million young men in a wide range of projects, from tree planting and forest restoration to erosion control, damming and irrigation, fish stocking, firefighting, and mosquito control. The

corps also built campgrounds, lodges, trails, fire roads, and wild-life shelters (Maher 2009). All told, the program cost \$6 billion, an investment of \$2,000 per person, or about \$34,000 in today's dollars. About 18 percent of this investment came in the form of salary paid to CCC inductees, and the remainder paid for materials, equipment, and of course food. In return, the country benefited from 4 billion planted trees, 125,000 miles of new roads, over 100,000 new bridges and buildings, and thousands of miles of telephone poles and wires (Paige 1985).

Charles Heathcott was inducted into Company 687 at Walhalla, Michigan, and sent to nearby Ludington for training

in the CCC Cooks and Bakers School (Enrollee File for Charles Heathcott 1942). On June 3, 1940, his teacher, Bert Tam, issued the cookbook shown above to the recruits. Titled *Quantity Recipes for Quality Foods*, the book was a promotional offering from the Evaporated Milk Association, a Chicago-based trade organization founded in 1923 to promote research on and consumption of condensed dairy products (Evaporated Milk Association 1928). First developed in the late nineteenth century, such products had become essential to the economies of scale required for war mobilization and disaster relief. During the Great Depression, cooks and bakers

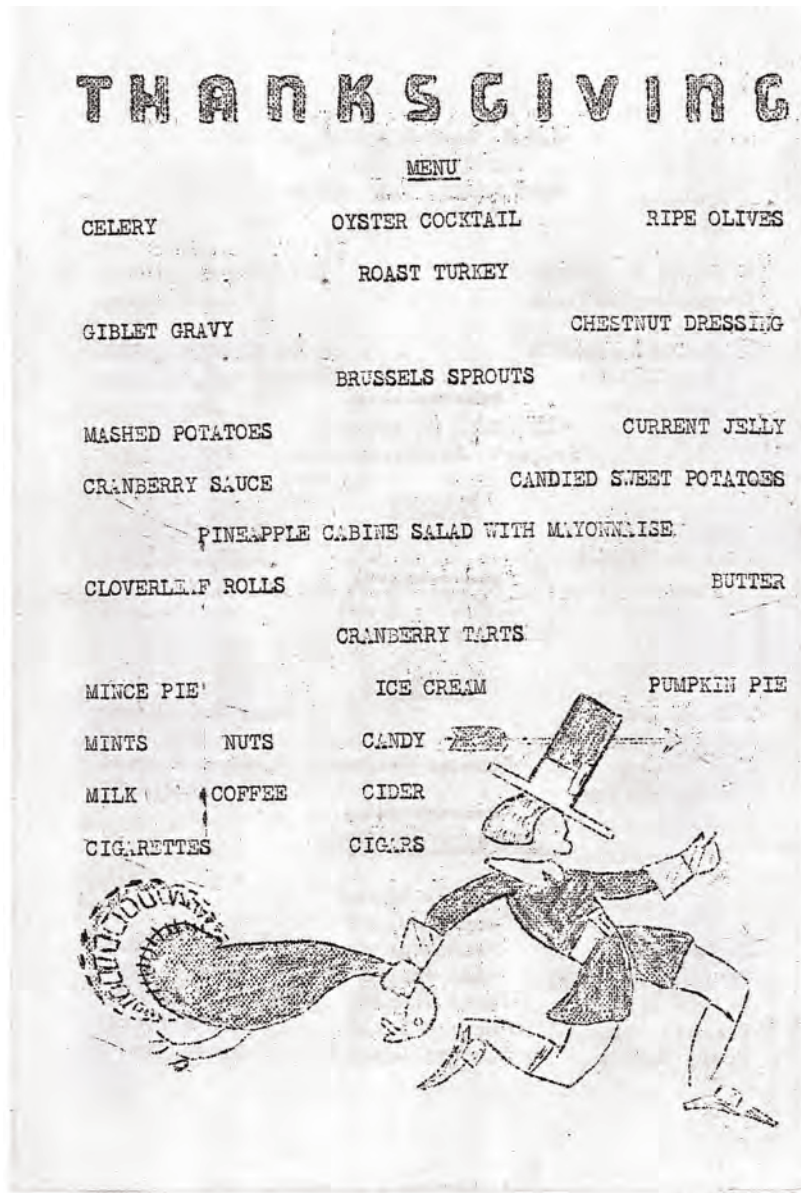


FIGURE 4: Typewritten menu for Thanksgiving Dinner, CCC Camp Roy, Ft. Lewis, Washington, n.d.

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

used evaporated milk to stretch recipes, and the association's booklet provided guidance for turning out meals on an institutional scale for schools, hospitals, churches, camps, restaurants, and emergency canteens. Such techniques had a lasting impact on American dietary habits (Ziegelman and Coe 2016).

For the next year, my grandfather made rotations through several camps in Michigan. Like his fellows, he earned a dollar a day, seventy-five cents of which the CCC sent home to his mother in Evansville. When he was not laboring on the work crews building fire roads in state parks, he was peeling potatoes and stirring stews in the mess hall. Day after day, week after week, my grandpa fed multitudes, supplementing the rations with herbs and vegetables from a kitchen garden that he kept near the mess hall. *Quantity Recipes for Quality Foods* was his bible, the go-to source for feeding his campmates within the federal government's allotted budget of thirty-three cents per person per day for "subsistence" (U.S. War Department 1933). Armed with these recipes, he could make fifty servings of scrapple, sixty half-cups of comstarch pudding, a giant molded chicken loaf, four dozen plates of creamed bacon, numberless deviled eggs, stockpots full of split pea soup, and mass quantities of something called "spaghetti loaf." The book also included a list of twenty "Sandwich Suggestions," each slathered with a dressing made from evaporated milk.

While the recipes may seem dated to us today, they provided malnourished young men with highly nutritious food, brimming with much-needed fats, calories, and carbohydrates (Reiman 1992). Indeed, my grandfather had spent a good part of his youth sleeping in haylofts, train yards, and boxcars. There were many days and nights when he and his fellow migrants had nothing to eat. So for legions of young men like him who had suffered hunger and shelter insecurity, the availability of "three hots and a cot" in the CCC proved a godsend.

After the CCC, Charles Heathcott returned to Evansville and found work driving delivery trucks. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, he tried to join the Army, but found himself classified 4-F, "essential personnel." He joined the Teamsters Union, and spent most of the war hauling materials and munitions to and from war production facilities along the Ohio River. In 1943, he married my grandmother, Catherine Raley, who had also worked in the New Deal as a seamstress in the WPA. Together they raised two sons, bought a small house, and created an extensive network of friends and neighbors. Like most working-class families, their community life revolved around church socials, union picnics, school bake sales, christenings, and other events where large quantities of food were served (Heathcott 2003).

Through it all, grandpa retained his passion for cooking and gardening. This barrel-chested, tattooed truck driver loved

nothing more than to bake, broil, sauté, and fry. He was a staple at church fundraisers and school events, cooking giant quantities of food for hundreds of people. I can still picture him at the St. Joe Summer Social, commanding the fried chicken brigade: tables strewn with raw chicken, huge bowls of batter, and what looked like an acre of deep fryers, all lined up under a tent behind the church. At home, he taught my cousins and me how to make spaghetti sauce, how to grill hamburgers, and how to pick tomatoes and snap green beans. He also inaugurated us into the mysteries of the morning cup of coffee.

But it was not only cooking that the CCC imparted to my grandfather. It also made him a lifelong FDR Democrat, loyal to the basic social contract forged under the New Deal. Just when he needed it the most, the government stepped into his life, spent money on him, gave him and millions of others work, dignity, and value. The CCC prepared him to stand up and be counted, and to believe in causes larger than himself. When Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, attempting to roll back elements of the New Deal and limit the power of unions, grandpa joined the massive wave of industrial action, refusing to deliver freight across picket lines and eventually going on strike (Lipsitz 1994). For many years he worked with the St. Joseph Men's Club, raising money for widows and orphans, and with my grandmother he volunteered at the Little Sisters of the Poor nursing home delivering food for elderly residents. The discipline, camaraderie, and sense of duty that he learned in the CCC served him well throughout his life.

After the strikes and recessions of the postwar years, things settled down in the 1960s and 1970s. Those decades proved relatively stable for workers like my grandfather—indeed, in his forty years as a truck driver, he only worked for two companies. In 1982, however, his employer filed for bankruptcy, taking advantage of the relaxed regulations established by the Reagan administration under Chapter 11. At age fifty-nine, my grandfather was out of a job, and too old to find new work. It was the beginning of the unraveling of the New Deal order that my grandfather cherished—an unraveling that continues today, and that will likely reach its apogee in the coming years (Fraser and Gerstle 1990).

My grandfather coped with this loss, in part, by getting back into the kitchen and dusting off his old copy of *Quantity Recipes for Quality Foods*. After forty years of rising at 4:00 a.m. to a breakfast prepared by my grandmother, he spent the next twenty-five years making her breakfast—often serving it to her in bed with the morning paper. In what seems now like a pent-up burst of culinary energy, he spent the 1980s and 1990s in a cooking frenzy. He could often be found at the kitchen stove, baking mass quantities of cookies and pies for the Men's Club, the Ladies' Auxiliary, the Little

Sisters of the Poor, the Daughters of Isabelle, or grandma's poker club. He channeled his despair over losing his livelihood into greased baking pans, sifted flour, tomato vines, and bell peppers (called "mangoes" in southern Indiana, for some reason). Our family was never short of giant red tomatoes grown in grandpa's backyard—an art he learned in the CCC.

Grandpa died in 2013. He did not leave much behind, because over the years he and grandma gave so much of what they owned away to family, friends, and church. But I count myself fortunate to have his dog-eared and well-thumbed CCC cookbook, riddled with stains from a thousand meals—a glob of dough here, a splotch of sauce there. I know how important this book was to him. He kept it for sixty-three years, not tucked away in the attic, but on the bookshelf with his other cookbooks. He referred to it frequently, deploying its quantity recipes in the service of community, church, and civic life.

I do not know if objects have politics or not. But I do know that politics leave objects behind in the flows of history. This object seems ordinary enough: a cookbook. At its most basic, it is a set of instructions about how to get large amounts of food into large numbers of bellies. Published by a trade association, its mundane purpose was to boost sales of a key ingredient while imparting lessons of institutional efficiency and resource economy. But the cookbook is much more than that. It is deeply connected to the ways in which my grandfather entered adulthood, built up his esteem, engaged community, created an associational life, and thought about what people owed to each other in this world.

I am not nostalgic for the New Deal; that was a different world, caught up in different circumstances. Maybe the era of New Deals and Square Deals and Great Societies is gone, products of a mass industrial culture that no longer exists (Kennedy 2001). Maybe we have lost the capacity to build grand bargains, now that every citizen is an autonomously acting niche consumer. Of course, knowing history is important to relieve the future of the burden of the past. But melancholic longing for politics gone by only hampers our capacity to conceive something relevant and new.

Nevertheless, we are at a similar juncture to that in which my grandfather found himself in the 1930s, a moment when we must reimagine the basic social contract. We have to think long and hard about what our governing institutions can offer working people, and how we might shape them to meet the immense challenges of the twenty-first century (Aslam 2016). We have to find ways to rekindle hope in young people for a future unencumbered by crushing debt, rampant inequality, endless war, and runaway climate change. We have to remake civic institutions that look like the plural

America in which they exist, and that serve everyone equally. We have to rebuild communities along the lines of care and support. We all have to believe there is a collective project. What is at stake is not just a program or a political party, but democracy itself.

So what's in a cookbook? A young man's redemption from poverty and pain. A chance to dream a better future. A deep sense of fairness and brotherhood. A politics of redistribution, where everyone has a stake in democracy. And evaporated milk. Gallons and gallons of evaporated milk.

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